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Floral Imagery Within Wartime Era Poetry:
How Its Usage Transforms Memory and Remembrance

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World at War

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The World Wars had a devastating impact on the soldiers and citizens that lived and suffered through them. They took a tremendous toll physically, mentally, and emotionally. For many, if it was even possible, an escape was needed. Any outlet that could provide a way to cope with and verbalize their experiences was an endeavor worth undertaking. The arts, especially poetry, was a way those within the wartime eras could express and process what they had endured.

A great number of wartime poetry incorporated a common, and perhaps unconventional, imagery: flowers. The way in which wartime poets described the World Wars, through their romantic use of flora, shapes one's memory of the personal experiences of war. Therefore, it is important to analyze some of the wartime era's most popular poetry that includes floral imagery and the role it serves within these poems. Whether intentionally or not, the use of floral imagery in wartime poetry alters the perceptions of those who were not there to witness or be involved in the wars.

Today one can associate flowers, specifically poppies, with nearly anything World War related.¹ They are seen as the symbol of remembrance,² and this is practically universal.³ Poppies are worn to commemorate and honor those who sacrificed their lives in the name of freedom- just as wartime poets attempt to convey in their writings. The inclusion of poppies, and floral imagery as a whole, within wartime poetry transforms one's memory and perception regarding

¹ Sarah Montin, "Not Flowers for Poets' tearful foolings," *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 27, (2015): 1.

² Montin, 1.

³ Ann Elias, "War and the visual language of flowers: an antipodean perspective," *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 20, no. 1/2 (2008): 234.

the war. By analyzing the same poems that Robert Hemmings did in his article, “Of Trauma and Flora: Memory and Commemoration in Four Poems of the World Wars,”⁴ one can begin to understand the unique role they play.

The compelling arguments and emotions these poems invoke is due, in part, to their sole use of language. It is the careful choosing of words that invites listeners and readers to engage and submerge themselves in the heart, mind, and soul of the author. This is especially important for those who wrote poetry during the war, as the other popular means of expressing ideas was in the form of propaganda. Both allowed for “...the citizens and the soldiers of the future [to share] in the culture of wartime.”⁵ However, contrasting with the intimacy and vulnerability of poetry, propaganda should be seen more “...as a state-dominated lawyers’ brief, pleading the cause of the nation before its population and that of the world.”⁶ Rather than reflecting on the inner-most and more sacred thoughts of war, as is the focus of many wartime era poems, propaganda was almost exclusively an advertising tool and call-to-action geared towards the general populace to get involved in the war efforts. This is one reason the study of wartime poetry and the ideas and images they expressed deserve attention: to not only comprehend but to understand the more personal experiences of the World Wars.

The extent of each World War far surpassed the capacity of expression for poets: how does one put into words everything evil that war encompassed and embodied? This was a new

⁴ Robert Hemmings, “Of Trauma and Flora: Memory and Commemoration in Four Poems of the World Wars,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (2008).

⁵ J. M. Winter, “Propaganda and the Mobilization of Consent,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War New Edition*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 219.

⁶ Winter, 216.

challenge for poets in both wars who were attempting to explain their horrendous experiences.

The pain and loss resulted in a variety of responses⁷ from those who desperately wanted to comprehend what had happened to them. Writing poetry was not just an act to understand for themselves, but war also compelled poets to write and share the stories of some that never got the same opportunity.⁸

It was noted that “Because of the failure and hence language to contain experience, the soldiers of the Great War felt that they possessed a secret, ‘a secret’, said Charles Carrington, ‘that can never be communicated’.”⁹ and also “the horror, devastation, and scope of the Second World War overwhelmed the western imagination.”¹⁰ Poets wanted to express what they had endured, yet they found it challenging to find the right words (if there really were any), that could appropriately describe their experiences.¹¹ Wartime poets John McCrae, Ivor Gurney, John Jarman, and Keith Douglas, helped make the World Wars more personal for those separated from them by time. While each piece requires individual attention, each one should be described in light of the legacy of John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields,” as it set the tone for remembering and memorializing war through flower-related imagery in poetry.

⁷ Ezekiel Black, “Mouthlessness and Ineffability in World War I Poetry and The Waste Land,” *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* 25, (2013): 4.

⁸ Black, 4.

⁹ Modris Eksteins, “Memory and the Great War,” in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War New Edition*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 320.

¹⁰ Eksteins, 327.

¹¹ Black, 1.

After earning his undergraduate and medical degrees from the University of Toronto, John McCrae went on to serve in the Boer War, was eventually given the rank of major in 1904, and later joined the Royal College of Surgeons during the First World War. He became the first Canadian to be appointed consulting surgeon to the British Army. During his service within Belgium's Ypres salient on April 15, 1915, following the death of a dear friend, he wrote "In Flanders Field." This poem's publication led to the advancement of the poppy as the "Flower of Remembrance for the British and Commonwealth war dead."¹²

McCrae's poem has become one of the most famous poems of World War I. It has been an encouragement for those who are living to remember those who died away from home while serving.¹³ The explicit use of floral images, namely poppies, within the poem have important implications the meaning of the poem itself and how others remember the war. The flowers are referenced in lines one and fourteen.¹⁴ Their inclusion by McCrae was quite deliberate and one of his most blatant expressions, and may even have proved to be one of his most brilliant artistic choices:

Poppies were a symbol for death in war before World War One, but it was McCrae's poem that helped to popularize the poppy as a sign of remembrance for the Great War. Poppies have been associated with the battlefield since at least the Napoleonic wars, when poppies would thrive and grow on the fields freshly

¹² "John McCrae 1872-1918," Poetry Foundation, accessed December 2, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/john-mccrae>.

¹³ G. M. Griffiths, "In Flanders Fields - John McCrae," *Move Him Into the Sun: Studying the Literature of the First World War* (blog), December 11, 2010, <https://movehimintotheshun.wordpress.com/2010/12/11/in-flanders-fields-john-mccrae/>.

¹⁴ See Appendix 1

manured by blood. Poppies were also associated with sleep (opium being a poppy derivate) and McCrae, being a doctor, would have been conscious of this: the idea of sleeping under the poppies is revived in the last lines.¹⁵

McCrae's use of poppies in his poem gave a whole new meaning to the term "rest in peace". As the soldiers of the past lay "sleeping" in the battlefields in which they served, he calls upon those living to not let the fallen soldiers' deaths be in vain. His vision surely has not been overlooked, as the poppy remains one of the sole ways in which people remember and memorialize the Great War. Even amongst the ugliness of the war, both on the battlefield and the scars it leaves on peoples' lives, there is still beauty amidst it all.

Another one of the World War I greats was Ivor Gurney, a beloved poet and composer who studied at the Royal College of Music prior to the start of the war. While he had physical limitations that initially disqualified him for service, he soon found himself serving in the 2nd/5th Gloucesters in 1917 in France.¹⁶ It is said that his poem, "To His Love," is written from the perspective of a soldier, speaking to the spouse of a dead soldier, reflecting on how dearly missed the fallen soldier's companionship will be.¹⁷

While McCrae's use of flora in "In Flanders Field" had a greater scope—remembering fallen soldiers' in a foreign land for their service—Ivor Gurney's poem, "To His Love," is more

¹⁵ G. M. Griffiths, "In Flanders Fields - John McCrae."

¹⁶ "Ivor Gurney 1890-1937," Poetry Foundation, accessed December 2nd, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ivor-gurney>.

¹⁷ G. M. Griffiths, "To His Love - Ivor Gurney," *Move Him Into the Sun: Studying the Literature of the First World War* (blog), April 22, 2011, <https://movehimintotheshun.wordpress.com/2011/04/22/to-his-love-ivor-gurney/>.

emotional and sentimental, and is reminiscent of what it means for fellow soldiers to protect the honor of a fallen soldier. This is reflected in lines thirteen through sixteen of his poem¹⁸:

*The speaker quickly turns from thinking of the dead body to the **noble** manner of his death—doing his duty with chivalry. The flowers will cover him like a shroud. The purple of the violets, like the soldier “from Severn side”, symbolise pride as purple is a colour associated with kingship. The exclaimed repetition of ‘cover him’ shows the desperation and revulsion of the speaker.*¹⁹

In the context of World War I, the idea of dying for one’s country was thought to be the greatest achievement and deserved the upmost regard and respect. Although flowers are not mentioned until the latter half of the poem, they play an important role. The fallen soldier was to be covered thickly by flowers so that his honor, rather than his destroyed body, would be remembered. Considering the soldier was speaking to the spouse of the fallen soldier in the poem, the flowers were used as a mask to hide the horrors of war. It was seen as a moment of utter pride, on behalf of the survivor, for the dead soldier to be covered in the purple flowers, to be seen as a sort of royalty.

World War I and II poets produced beautiful and moving pieces that included floral imagery that juxtaposed with the backdrop of war. British poet John Jarman was educated at Shrewsbury School and continued his schooling at Queens’ College, Cambridge, studying and teaching mathematics prior to the war. He soon found himself serving in 242 ‘Oban’ Battery, 61st Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery attached to the 51st Highland Division. His first experience

¹⁸ See Appendix 2

¹⁹ G. M. Griffiths, “To His Love - Ivor Gurney.”

of war came after two years at the Battle of El Alamein in October-November 1942. It is believed that “Much of John Jarmain’s best poetry was written at this time, often on the move, living rough in the desert...”.²⁰

The sentiments shared within McCrae’s poem—of flowers thriving in the most unlikely of places, the battlefields—are shared almost thirty years later within John Jarmain’s poem, “El Alamein.” Flower-related imagery is included in five places throughout the course of the poem.²¹ The stark contrast of these images with the reality of what the soldiers witnessed, as explained by Jarmain, defines just how different the world of “El Alamein” was for those who were not there. The tone of the poem is disbelief, that while people now see flowers and lilies, all that he remembers is war: damage, destruction, and death. To him, it is unimaginable that what is left of the war are flowers and not the horrors he remembers.

Keith Douglas is “...now regarded as one of the great British poets of the Second World War...”.²² Studying at Christ’s Hospital and eventually finding himself at Merton College, University of Oxford, he was fully engaged in the literary life his schools offered until the outbreak of war. During World War II he “...entered military service believing battle experience

²⁰ James Crowden, “John Jarmain (1911-1944),” War Poets Association, last modified January 2014, <http://www.warpoets.org/conflicts/world-war-ii/john-jarmain-1911-1944/>.

²¹ See Appendix 3

²² “A Short Analysis of Keith Douglas’s ‘Vergissmeinnicht’” last modified August 31, <https://interestingliterature.com/2017/08/31/a-short-analysis-of-keith-douglass-vergissmeinnicht/>.

would be beneficial to him as a writer. He considered the war the most relevant literary topic of his time, and maintained that only a soldier could write authentically about the world.”²³

The previous three poems studied, especially McCrae’s, have been heavily centered around the ideas of remembrance and memorializing soldiers and the war, each one tinged with emotion. This was not the artistic style employed by Keith Douglas, though, in his poem “Vergissmeinnicht”, German for “forget me not”. It is important to note that while the poem does not make mention of flora, the play on words of “forget me not”, by the soldier to his lover but also the flower, cannot be avoided. The artistic deviance of Douglas is most evident in the final two lines of the poem.²⁴ Rather than taking a broad approach like McCrae, “Vergissmeinnicht” reflects on a more personal matter: a lover and her soldier (like Gurney’s). The lover has a skewed perception of her soldier, and the narrator is commenting on how she will always remember him for someone he was not: a lover, not a killer.²⁵ Her memory of him will forever be tainted by the man she knew before the war. To her, war killed her lover rather than her lover being the killer.

It is through the work of these four poets that others can catch a small glimpse into wartime culture and interpret the messages and lessons of war: both beauty and damage remain amidst the ugliness of war, protecting the honor of the fallen soldier, and the fear of being forgotten. These important ideals are encapsulated within the usage of floral imagery by these men. Their willingness to share the innermost feelings of war through such unique means allows

²³ “Keith Douglas 1920-1944,” Poetry Foundation, accessed December 2, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/keith-douglas>.

²⁴ See Appendix 4

²⁵ “Keith Douglas 1920-1944.”

the opportunity for those distanced from the war to begin to memorialize and remember the war in the most proper way.

Appendix 1

'In Flanders Fields' – John McCrae

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago

We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Appendix 2

‘To His Love’ – Ivor Gurney

He's gone, and all our plans
Are useless indeed.
We'll walk no more on Cotswolds
Where the sheep feed
Quietly and take no heed.

His body that was so quick
Is not as you
Knew it, on Severn River
Under the blue
Driving our small boat through.

You would not know him now...
But still he died
Nobly, so cover him over
With violets of pride
Purple from Severn side.

Cover him, cover him soon!
And with thick-set
Masses of memoried flowers-
Hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget.

Appendix 3

'El Alamein' – John Jarman

There are flowers now, they say, at Alamein;
Yes, flowers in the minefields now.
So those that come to view that vacant scene,
Where death remains and agony has been
Will find the lilies grow –
Flowers, and nothing that we know.
So they rang the bells for us and Alamein,
Bells which we could not hear:
And to those that heard the bells what could it mean,
That name of loss and pride, El Alamein?
- Not the murk and harm of war,
But their hope, their own warm prayer.
It will become a staid historic name,
That crazy sea of sand!
Like Troy or Agincourt its single fame
Will be the garland for our brow, our claim,
On us a fleck of glory to the end:
And there our dead will keep their holy ground.
But this is not the place that we recall,
The crowded desert crossed with foaming tracks,
The one blotched building, lacking half a wall,
The grey-faced men, sand powdered over all;
The tanks, the guns, the trucks,
The black, dark-smoking wrecks.
So be it: none but us has known that land:
El Alamein will still be only ours
And those ten days of chaos in the sand.
Others will come who cannot understand,
Will halt beside the rust minefield wires
And find there – flowers.

Appendix 4

‘Vergissmeinnicht’ – Keith Douglas

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone
returning over the nightmare ground
we found the place again, and found
the soldier sprawling in the sun.

The frowning barrel of his gun
overshadowing. As we came on that day, he hit my tank with one
like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil
the dishonoured picture of his girl
who has put: Steffi. Vergissmeinnicht.
in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content,
abased, and seeming to have paid
and mocked at by his own equipment
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

But she would weep to see today
how on his skin the swart flies move;
the dust upon the paper eye
and the burst stomach like a cave.

For here the lover and killer are mingled
who had one body and one heart.
And death who had the soldier singled
Has done the lover moral hurt.

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